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Trickster: Shaman of the Liminal

Larry Ellis

The Native American Trickster is a figure who defies category. He is at once the scorned outsider and the culture-hero, the mythic transformer and the buffoon, a creature of low purpose and questionable habits who establishes precedent, dabbles in the creation of the world that will be, and provides tools, food, and clothing to the people who will inhabit that world. He may assume an array of contradictory personae in the course of a single narrative, moving from one to the other with the skill of a practiced shape-shifter while tripping on his tail at every turn. Trickster creates through destruction and succeeds through failure; his mythic and cultural achievements are seldom intentional. "Defining such a various creature," writes Jarold Ramsey, "is a little like trying to juggle hummingbirds" (26).

Ramsey attempts to reconcile Trickster's inconsistencies by pointing out the tendency of Native American myth-narrative to carry out "a plurality of significant and interrelated functions simultaneously" (24), and goes on to outline an inductive/deductive approach to Trickster study that is "attentive to character features *and* role" (27). However, any effort to arrive at a more complete definition of this most illusive of characters must eventually leave the search for definition behind. Even Ramsey's emphasis on cultural perspective and role/character correspondence cannot pierce Trickster's mythic core, for it is a place that is more closely associated with the landscape in which he travels and performs than with who or what he appears to be. If we are to begin to understand Trickster, and to perceive the strange unity that arises from the contradictory and irrational in his nature, we should examine him as a function of this landscape, and further as its haphazard and unwilling manipulator.

Barbara Babcock-Abrahams suggests that Trickster thrives in a

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region of in-betweens where ambiguity, paradox, and "a confusion of all customary categories" (160) are the natural order. It is a place where opposites meet and commingle and is "usually situated between the social cosmos and the other world or chaos" (159); the clashing and overlapping of disparate realities provides this "marginal" region with its peculiar identity.

Trickster personifies marginality. He stands in the "Betwixt and Between" (93), the transitional state that Victor Turner calls "liminality." Straddling the juncture of two worlds, he belongs to neither and yet to both, and if his behavior confounds us, it is because we see in him the apparent confusion that characterizes the marginal/liminal landscape.[1] Turner views liminal reality as an unlikely but potent source of creation:

> Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise. (97)

Trickster is the hesitant avatar of this region of thresholds and boundaries, this "realm of pure possibility." He embodies the fantastical, bewildering mixture of order and disorder that is its trademark. He is its creature—and its shaman.

The power of the Native American medicine man, or shaman, is grounded in a unique bond with the otherworld that is often established in a ritual of isolation, fasting, and meditation that in many ways resembles the "rites of passage" upon which Victor Turner bases his definition of liminality (93-94). Indeed, the shaman is a liminal figure, a mediator who stands between the supernatural and the world of the People. The measure of his skill and success is the degree to which he is able to establish harmony between these two worlds. His tribe may consider him a "loose cannon," for the rituals and spirit guides that aid him in channelling the power of the otherworld to benefit the community usually respond to him and him alone. He is a valued and essential member of the tribe, but to some degree will always remain the outsider—powerful, unpredictable, and incomprehensible. Trickster's shamanism works on as many levels as he has roles, and with characteristic absurdity. He draws his power from the realm of the liminal, wielding it in a manner that parodies the significance of what he accomplishes.[2]

Perhaps the most incongruous of Trickster's personae is that of the mythic transformer. The world of myth is a place of creation in which things and events, from the seemingly insignificant to the momentous, are altered in preparation for the world to come. Trickster is a figure

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of myth, and in singular fashion sets out to change the mythic landscape in every area imaginable. However, his creative accomplishments are almost always the result of accident, usually in the pursuit of selfish or irrational goals. Thus, the Nez Perce coyote trickster establishes the permanence of death through failure to follow the instructions of his spirit guide as he attempts to retrieve his wife from the world of the dead (Phinney 282-85), and Wadjunkaga of the Winnebago inadvertently provides a food source for the People when his penis, which has been gnawed to pieces by a chipmunk, is transformed into edible roots and berries (Radin 38-39).

There can be little doubt that Trickster is capable of creation. The evidence is widespread. What is remarkable is the manner in which he creates, for the act of bringing into existence is somehow less worthy of acceptance if done by accident or as the result of foolish behavior. It would seem that we judge our creators as much for attitude as for product, and Trickster's attitude is far from exemplary.[3]

Yet Trickster's approach, or non-approach, to the process of mythic transformation may not be as random as it seems. It is certainly haphazard and self-seeking, but that is Trickster's nature, and his nature is, in fact, the source of his power. By acting true to character, Trickster in effect performs a shamanistic ritual that connects the otherworld to the world of the People through acts of creation and transformation that occur in the world of myth. His power is rooted in liminality and he calls it forth merely by expressing his liminal nature in the outlandish behavior for which he is so well known. The Nez Perce Coyote achieves mythic success through lust and impatience, and Wadjunkaga's fortunate accident occurs for similar reasons. In neither case is Trickster's goal realized—Coyote fails to rescue his wife and Wadjunkaga's exploration of the hollow of a tree is, so to speak, cut short. However, on the mythic level he performs a shamanism of the highest order. He is both conjurer and conduit of the creative and cultural forces that he puts into motion.

Trickster will often assume the role of minor shaman to pursue his less-than-admirable ends. The Wishram coyote, for example, attempts to conceal his masturbation from the People by fortifying his sweat-lodge:

> Now then at dark he camped again,
> now then he slept in a sweathouse,
> now then in the sweathouse he made it rock.
>
> Now then he was licking his penis,
> now then he came out:
> "This sweathouse will be a rock." (Kalapuya 44)

In another version of the story he constructs a barrier of rimrock:

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> He thought: "They'll make news."
>
> Then he done his hands like this [extended arm, elbow bent, palm erect and facing outward, moving left and right in a wide sweep]: [Then] it became rimrock clear to the river from the top of the hill on both sides of the river. (Smith 98)

Coyote's shamanism is flawed, however, for his spells are incomplete:

> Now then he examined his sweathouse;
> now then he saw
> where the rock had been cracked apart.
>
> "Ohhhhh! I suppose this is where the news came out from it." (Kalapuya 45)

And:

> He got afraid: It might make news
> [But] already the wind blew down
> over the rimrock; already the news
> got ahead of him. (Smith 98)

The "news" escapes, and wherever Coyote goes he finds that it has preceded him. His failure, however, is transformed into success, for on the mythic level he performs the more significant feat of destroying the inviolability of all that is secret or hidden:

> "That is how it is going to be,
> "That is the way it will always be,
> "Nothing will ever be hidden,
> "That is the way it will always be." (Kalapuya 45)

Jarold Ramsey describes Trickster as a "false shaman," a source of satire on the "excesses and abuses of shamanism" (33), but also as Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, "a sort of mythic handy-man who 'cobbles' reality in the form of a *bricolage* out of the available material" (41). The Wishram coyote is clearly an object of satire and ridicule. He is portrayed as an incompetent charlatan who conjures barriers that are impressively wrought but ultimately Without substance, and the careless, self-serving manner in which he wields those powers he is able to summon stands the traditional tribe-nurturing role of the shaman on its head. The false shaman persona makes effective use of negative example to define and focus this role; however, its purpose does not end here. It is also the first stage of a mythic creative process, providing the botched magic with which Trickster unwittingly constructs the *bricolage* that will determine the realities of the world to come. Coyote's blundering attempts to effect secrecy not only fail, they set mythic precedent ("Nothing will ever be hidden . . ."), and if

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what is achieved is not what is intended, it nevertheless represents a successful shamanistic endeavor. The false shaman, in fact, becomes the mythic shaman. Impotence is transformed into power, absurdity into meaning, and the trivial into the consequential as Trickster is unceremoniously shuffled from one role to the next amid a confusion of ironies that is characteristically liminal.

In Native American trickster literature, liminality finds specific expression in the metaphor and imagery of the threshold and the boundary. The marginal/liminal landscape discussed by Barbara Babcock-Abrahams and Victor Turner is a gray, uncertain area, a point of connection and transition between specifics of culture and myth. It begins as a boundary, a line or region that simultaneously marks intersection and separation. When the boundary is crossed, or opportunities are offered for its crossing—as in the discovery and negotiation of a pass over a range of mountains—it becomes a threshold. Further examination reveals that every threshold is bound to a matrix of subordinate thresholds, all of which not only exist as closed systems but interreact in infinite combination, from the broad, mythic limen that joins the cosmos and the world of the People to the most subtle transition in culture or individual thought. A society that moves from a hunting and gathering to an agricultural way of life, for example, experiences a complex interaction of thresholds that range from the larger transitions in technology, ritual, mythology, and art to the reaction of a single member of that society to the introduction of a new tool or mythological motif.

The strangeness and incomprehensibility of the liminal is because, at least in part then, of its complexity, for the quanta at play are vast, even in the smallest systems. If there is indeed a logic to liminal reality, it is so involved and open-ended that it is perhaps best discerned through symbol, metaphor, and image—all of which are provided in Trickster's interaction with the wide array of boundaries and thresholds that lie scattered throughout the tales in which he takes part.

Mythic literature has recognized the power and importance of liminality in its imagistic approach to physical and temporal boundaries. Rivers, roads, seashores, mountain ranges, twilight—in short, anything that separates one time or space in the physical world from another—have represented to cultures world-wide the point at which the realms of the natural and supernatural collide. Liminal reality holds sway here, and thresholds, or points of crossing—bridges, crossroads, and fords—are of special consequence, for they provide a point of interaction between mortal or mythic beings and the forces of the liminal. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams writes that Trickster "tend[s] to inhabit crossroads, open public places [especially the marketplace],

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doorways, and thresholds" (159). This would seem to indicate that his association with the broader definition of liminality extends into the specific liminal imagery of his literature. Further extrapolation suggests the probability that Trickster's creative shamanism, which is inextricably bound to the liminal, should find its mythic/literary expression in the imagery of the boundary and threshold.

In the oral literature of the Nez Perce of the northwestern United States, Trickster is the coyote. He is antisocial, cowardly, unsavory, and infinitely entertaining. His foibles are well-known to the People, and wherever he goes "everyone knows who he is." Coyote is also a powerful shaman/transformer (although he would never know it), and in the story "Coyote and the Shadow People" he stumbles through one of the most significant creative acts in Trickster literature—the establishment of death as a permanent and irrevocable state of being. Here we see Coyote at his most foolish and helpless—a state that is usually evocative of laughter in Trickster tales. However, in "Coyote and the Shadow People" the humor is dark, for it involves a tragic loss, not only for Coyote but for the People who will follow. "Coyote and the Shadow People" is clearly an "Orpheus myth," the story of a journey to the land of the dead in which a hero's attempt to retrieve a deceased loved one fails because at the last minute he violates the ritual of passage. It is the perfect vehicle for Trickster; he is a habitual breaker of rules and taboos, and his inability to follow even the simplest of rituals to successful completion is notorious.

Ake Hultkrantz has proven that the Orpheus myth is a widespread genre in North American Native Literatures, particularly in those of the hunting tribes of the northwestern United States and Canada. Like the trickster stories, it is centered on the shaman. Hultkrantz suggests that in Native American tradition, journeys to the otherworld can, in certain cases, be made by living persons:

> We do not need to be in any doubt, however, as to the category of persons here in question: they are, of course, the medicine men, the shamans, who, accompanied by their assistant spirits, have tried to fetch the souls of sick persons from the realm of the dead. (85)

The trance-journey of the shaman to the otherworld is a dangerous and culturally significant undertaking, and to Hultkrantz figures strongly in Native American Orpheus myths. For Coyote it is the means to achieve a shamanistic feat of even greater note, and to do this, as always, he must fail. The process and consequences of this failure are well-illustrated in "Coyote and the Shadow People," a summary of which follows (I am paraphrasing Archie Finney's translation [282-285]):

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Coyote's wife dies of an illness and he weeps for her. He is visited by the death spirit who offers to take him to the land of the dead if Coyote will follow his instructions. Coyote agrees. On their journey the spirit points out a herd of horses. Coyote cannot see the horses but he pretends that they are there. Neither can Coyote see the death spirit. He appears to be a shadow. When Coyote and the death spirit arrive at the land of the dead the spirit invites Coyote to eat some berries. Coyote cannot see them but pretends to eat them nevertheless. The spirit leads Coyote to a lodge and tells him to enter through the doorway and sit down beside his wife and eat the food that she has prepared for him. Coyote cannot see the lodge, the food, or his wife, but he obeys the spirit. When night falls Coyote sees the lodge that he could not see during the day, and in it are fires, and people he knew when they were living and, of course, his wife. With the dawn, everything and everyone disappears, only to return on the following evening. It is like this for several days and nights. Eventually the death spirit tells Coyote that he must leave. The spirit allows Coyote to take his wife with him but warns that he must not touch her until they have crossed the fifth mountain of the five mountains that lie between the lands of the living and the dead. Coyote agrees. Coyote and his wife begin their journey. At night they sit with a fire between them and Coyote notices that with every night his wife's form becomes clearer. On the last night of the journey Coyote can wait no longer and reaches across the fire to embrace his wife. She disappears the moment he touches her. The death spirit returns and tells Coyote that because of his foolishness the practice of returning from the dead will never be and that the dead must remain forever separate from the living. The spirit leaves. Coyote tries to return to the land of the dead, repeating everything he was instructed to do on the first journey: he pretends to see a herd of horses, to eat berries, to enter a lodge, to acknowledge his wife, and to eat the food she has prepared for him. When evening comes the lodge, the fires, the people, and Coyote's wife do not appear, and they and the death spirit never appear to Coyote again.

The dominant feature in the action of "Coyote and the Shadow People" would seem to be the crossing of boundaries or, more specifically, the transformation of boundaries into thresholds. Coyote is given the opportunity to create a threshold out of the boundary that

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separates the living from the dead. He is assisted by the death spirit, who is the analog of the spirit guide described by Ake Hultkrantz as accompanying the shaman on his trance-journey into the land of the dead. Strict attention to the direction of the death spirit is necessary if the transformation is to succeed, and at first Coyote exhibits uncharacteristic wisdom and responsibility in doing what is required. He confronts a series of lesser boundaries, many of which must be transformed and crossed before the boundary to the land of the dead can be bridged. These secondary boundaries—sub-liminalities, as it were—constitute an imagery that is the literary reflection of the greater mythic boundary between death and life. The doorway to the lodge, the walkway that runs down the center of the lodge and the fires that stand on its edges, the fire that separates Coyote from his wife on their homeward journey, the mountains that separate the lands of the living and the dead, and the dawn and dusk that bound Coyote's perception of the land of the dead are all specific images that partake in a complex mythic and literary interplay that substantiates and defines this boundary.

The culture number of the Nez Perce is five. It signifies completion and is applied to groups of actions, objects, or beings that are working toward or have attained wholeness. Coyote must work his shamanism on five secondary boundaries before he is allowed to make contact with the dead. They are boundaries of perception, and to effect their transformation Coyote must assume the distinctly liminal rationale of perceiving the imperceptible. The herd of horses, the berries offered to him by the death spirit, the doorway to the lodge, the presence of his wife, and the food that she has prepared for him are successive points of crossing that must be negotiated in accordance with the ritual prescriptions of the death spirit, and Coyote performs admirably. Each in its turn is transformed into a threshold when he acknowledges its existence by executing the required pantomimic response. On completion of the fifth transformation, the boundary to the land of the dead is itself transformed and Coyote is allowed to enter, but only at sunset—the threshold that links day to night—and he must leave every morning by way of the threshold of the dawn.

Coyote's manipulation of liminal phenomena to establish a point of entry into the land of the dead is textbook shamanism. A major boundary is bridged by ritually transforming its component boundaries into thresholds, and it is the traditional shamanistic technique of subordinating the will to the direction of a spirit guide that makes this possible. A different kind of shamanism comes into play, however, when Coyote attempts to restore his wife to the land of the living. The boundaries encountered on the return journey are physical rather than perceptual, and if they are to be transformed Coyote must refrain from

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touching his wife until they are successfully negotiated. Again, the Nez Perce number of completion is involved: five mountains must be crossed to realize fully the threshold that will allow the dead to return to life. However, Coyote at last behaves true to character and violates the ritual of passage by reaching for his wife on the night before the final mountain is crossed. She disappears and cannot complete the crossing. The fifth boundary is not transformed, and the threshold that will bridge the living to the dead cannot be created. Coyote's wife must remain forever in the land of the dead and he must go home alone. It is at this point that the caprices of the liminal are unleashed and the coyote trickster, in the process of his failure, is himself transformed, from the failed shaman into the mythic shaman, and an awesome precedent is established:

> When the death-spirit learned of Coyote's folly he became deeply angry. "You inveterate doer of this kind of thing! I told you not to do anything foolish. You, Coyote were about to establish the practice of returning from death. Only a short time away the human race is coming, but you have spoiled every thing and established for them death as it is." (Phinney 285)

The Nez Perce coyote remains ignorant of the mythic potential of what he attempts, and his motives, however poignant their origin, are as selfish as those of the coyote of the Wishram.[4] Uncontrollable lust and a self-destructive inattention to procedure are at Trickster's very core, and it is only a matter of time before Coyote invokes the terrible, unpredictable power of the liminal by reverting to his own liminal nature. Curiously, it is fire—certainly the most potent image in "Coyote and the Shadow People"—that elicits this reversion. In true liminal fashion, fire behaves simultaneously as boundary *and* threshold. Implicitly, it casts the shadows that allow Coyote to perceive the forms of the dead:

> He saw that he was in a very, very large lodge and there were many fires burning. He saw the various people. They seemed to have shadow-like forms. . . . (Phinney 284)

Fire also outlines the boundaries that separate Coyote from those in the lodge who have died:

> He would march down the aisles between the fires, going here and there, and talk with the people. (284)

Fire is the barrier that stands between Coyote and his wife on their journey to the land of the living. Ironically, it is by the light of the fire that Coyote is able to see his wife slowly materialize. His lust and

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impatience are aroused and he breaks the boundary of the fire before the ritual of crossing is completed. A new, more powerful boundary comes between the living and the dead—and it can never be crossed.

Fire is the final and most powerful of the boundaries, and all minor transformations must be completed before it can be crossed. As Coyote's wife materializes, fire defines and illuminates her transformation, but with strange purpose, for its light excites the coyote trickster's renowned lust, urging him on to a tragic and unwitting act of mythic creation. Throughout most of the story, boundaries, spirit guide, and shaman interact in unexpected harmony, but when the final transformation is at hand Coyote is confronted by a boundary that his trickster nature forces him to violate. The duality of this boundary—for fire not only separates the living from the dead, it joins them through the perceptual medium of shadow—suggests a complexity that places it in a category beyond the imagery thus far encountered. In effect, fire is a symbolic construction of the full range of boundary/thresholds that participate in the tale of "Coyote and the Shadow People," and as such is a metaphor of the great limen that marks the juncture of life and death. Fire's nature is at once destructive and nurturing, fluid and impassable. Similarly, the transition from life to death is sorrowful but necessary, for it prevents overcrowding in the world of the People, and the passage leads only one way. This is "death as it is." Fire is its architect, strengthening the impassability of the limen that it represents by deliberately manipulating the shamanism of the coyote trickster. Behind everything lies the motive force and indiscernible purpose of liminality, bewildering in its complexity, consistent in its inconsistency.

Liminality itself is given a metaphor in another Nez Perce tale, the "Two Coyotes," which follows in full text:

> Two Coyotes were going upriver and came to a big bench. From there they saw people living below, near the river. Then the two friends said to each other, "you go ahead." Then one says "No. You go," and the other said "No." And they argued and protested for a long time. Then one said, "You go first they will see you any moment and say 'there is a coyote.'" They were going on the trail. [The other said] "I am not a coyote." [The first said,] "But you are just the way I am. We are the same in every way. We are both coyotes." [The other said,] "No, I am just 'another one.'" In this way they argued.
>
> Then the second one said to the first, "You go first." There was a ridge on which people could see everything from below. When he [the first] started walking, went on, and went over a small ridge, the people below said,

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> "There is a coyote going upstream." Then they [people] came out and watched the coyote going. "See?" he said. "See what they said? You are a coyote." "Come! You too." he said. "They will say the same of you. You are a coyote." "All right. I will go" [said the other], and he also slowly started walking on the trail from there. Then [people said], "Ah, another one again. There is another one." Then he came to the first, saying, "See? I am not a coyote. I am 'another one.' See, the people said that I am 'another one.'" That's all. (Aoki 17-19)

This short, deceptively simple story is dominated by motion, its trickster protagonists traveling from and to nowhere in particular along the edge of a river. Dell Hymes suggests that "Traveling on is indeed a fundamental premise of the Coyote cycle" (100), and examines the Hiram Smith coyote tale for evidence that Coyote may have been travelling "east in the direction along the Columbia River Gorge" (113). Trickster is a creature on the move, and his movement is often associated with rivers and roadways, which mythically can be defined as boundaries. A river divides the land, sometimes offering thresholds in the form of fords but often, if violent and fast-flowing, offering no point of crossing. However, Trickster does not relate to the river either as a boundary or a threshold. He symbolically travels within its flow, following its banks—and he travels upstream in both the Smith tale and "Two Coyotes." Barriers and points of crossing are irrelevant, for he is part of the river, just as he is a creature of the liminal, and he has no more control over the river's flow than he does over the power and purpose of liminality.[5]

The river in "Two Coyotes" works as a metaphor for liminality. The symbolic connection between water and the peculiarly liminal workings of the subconscious mind is well-established. The behavior of eddies and undercurrents in a river is strikingly similar to the complex interplay of boundaries and thresholds in a liminal situation, and the sculpting of a physical landscape by the power and flow of water in motion is a strong analog to the transformation of a mythic landscape by the phenomena of liminality. Trickster's shamanism is one of these phenomena, and it is ultimately out of his control, for although he may appear to travel the river's banks under his own power, it carries him where it will—even when he appears to be opposing its current.

Franchot Ballinger stresses the significance of the "socially didactic and corrective roles" of the Native American trickster, and warns against the imposition of metaphors that add "unnecessary layers of paradox to an already paradoxical figure" (15-17). The postmodernist approach of Gerald Vizenor suggests a greater attention to the lively

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chaos of "narrative discourse" in trickster tales than to structure and the "limited language game" of the social sciences (277-87). Any analysis of Native American oral literatures that relies on Euro-American metaphorical systems can only be viewed as incomplete and, occasionally, inappropriate. Yet Trickster is a character of many facets who invites multiple, often disparate, interpretations, if only to throw them—chewed, mangled, and exposed—back in our faces. The metaphor of the river in "Two Coyotes" may tempt such "trickster discourse," but it does serve to articulate the landscape symbolically in which and through which Trickster conjures, postures, and entertains. It sings his boundaries, and in this way, perhaps, defines him.

C. G. Jung writes that "The unity of the psyche's nature lies in the middle, just as the living unity of the waterfall appears in the dynamic connection of the above and below" (209). The Winnebago trickster Wadjunkaga ultimately rules on a level of the otherworld that stands between the Earthmaker and the world of the People (Radin 53), and Coyote will ever travel within the confines and flow of the river. The Native American Trickster is a figure of threshold and unity. He practices a strange shamanism which, for all its twists and turns, effectively draws the above to the below. Simultaneously and unintentionally, he creates a harmony between worlds and provides entertaining instruction on how to maintain that harmony.

And on a ridge that runs along the river stand the People, watching and commenting.

NOTES

[1]Franchot Ballinger finds discrepancies in Babcock-Abrahams' comparison of marginal and liminal (interstitial) states: "Sometimes the metaphors are used together with little regard for their contradictory implications. . . . Marginality means literally at the limit or edge, not outside of boundaries. And that which is interstitial is neither marginal or outside" (16-17). Ballinger's strict delineations may not be applicable here. What is in between is, to a large degree, both outside and on the edge. In any case, overlapping definition and skewed geometry would seem to be very much at home in a region characterized by "a confusion of all customary categories." This paper will use the terms interchangeably.

[2]Joseph Campbell describes Trickster as a "super-shaman. . . . The chief mythological character of the paleolithic world of story . . . an epitome of the principle of disorder, he is nevertheless the culture bringer also" (273-75).

[3]Trickster's unique approach to creation is sometimes tempered by what Jarold Ramsey calls "a sense of 'mythic fitness,'" recognizing " what 'the

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people who are to come soon' (the real Indians) will need in the finished world." However, "their actions and careers are still inextricably bound up in their careers as tricksters." He cites the example of the North Coast Raven, who "brings sunlight to the world because he thought it would be hard for him to obtain his food if it were always dark" (40-41).

[4]In contrast, the coyote trickster Ma'ii (First Angry) displays Ramsey's mythic fitness in establishing the reality of death for the Navajo. Tossing a stone into water, he declares "if it floats, we will all live forever. But if it sinks, everybody will die sooner or later." The stone sinks, and Ma'ii reasons that if human beings were to live forever, the world would become too overcrowded to accommodate succeeding generations of the People. "When the people heard what Ma'ii the Coyote had to say, they recognized the wisdom of his words" (Zolbrod 82-83).

[5]The spoof transformation performed by the second of the two coyotes exemplifies the satirical function of Trickster's false shaman persona. The coyote's perversion of the shape shifter's prerogative, while providing a good story with a great punch line, suggests a shaman who does not take his role and privileges seriously.

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